The Age Divide

How America's electoral system reinforces the gerontocracy and inhibits young people's full participation in democracy

Oscar Pocasangre and Dustin Wahl

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This paper was authored by Oscar Pocasangre and Dustin Wahl .

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Please direct inquiries to: press@protectdemocracy.org

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The Age Divide

Introduction

American leadership is older today than at any other time in history. The 118th Congress (2023-2025) had the oldest Senate ever, with a median age of 65, and the third oldest House of Representatives, with a median age of 58. The 119th is nearly the same: a median age of 65 in the Senate and 58 in the House.[1] Former President Joe Biden was the oldest president in the country's history, and by the end of President Donald Trump's term, he will break that record. "Gerontocracy" has become a familiar word among the American public.

The continued dominance of older generations in American politics raises urgent questions about the representation of young people and the barriers that keep younger generations from actively participating in politics.

Indeed, the age divide between legislators in the House and the general population is wider in the U.S. than in any other OECD country. The U.S. is also facing a participation divide: the youngest eligible voters are less engaged in politics. At each level of participation in elections, the electorate skews older. Voters are older than non-voters. Primary election voters are older than general election voters. Campaign donors are older than those who do not make donations. Abundant efforts to engage young people in the political process have not delivered a sustained increase in young people's involvement.

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These two interrelated and reinforcing gaps in representation and participation threaten the health of American democracy overall. Issues that young people care about do not receive as much attention as issues that older voters care about. Young people face high barriers when

[1] DeSilver, Drew. "Age and generation in the 119th Congress: Somewhat younger, with fewer Boomers and more Gen Xers," Pew Research, January 16, 2025, https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2025/01/16/age-and-generation-in-the-119th-congress-somewhat-younger-with-fewer-boomers-and-more-gen-xers/.

running for office, making it difficult for them to address their generation's concerns themselves through politics. In turn, this fuels cynicism and disengagement with electoral politics, which makes it even harder for young people to be heard or get elected and can make young people lose faith in democratic processes. Without the voice of young people, whether through the ballot or in legislatures, society as a whole misses out on the diverse perspectives and talents that are needed to solve collective problems and tackle new challenges.

This report explores the depth of disparities in participation and representation of young people, and offers a novel contribution to the question of its causes in the U.S. and potential remedies. It argues that the winner-take-all system suppresses participation among young people and limits their opportunities to influence policy. The report proposes that adopting proportional representation for legislative elections would foster greater inclusion of younger voters and their views, an outcome that would improve the health of democracy and benefit members of all generations.

> **Proportional representation** for legislative elections would foster greater inclusion of younger voters and their views, an outcome that would improve the health of democracy and benefit members of all generations.

To start, we bring together data from published research and from our own analysis to describe the age divides in representation and participation. Young people, which we define as people between the ages of 18 to 29, tend to hold different positions on various social and economic issues compared to older age groups, are more diverse as a group, and while most tend to align with the Democratic party, most young people have weaker attachments to either party than those in older age groups. These differences make the underrepresentation of young people in politics and their lower levels of participation that much more problematic as the political system does not accurately reflect their demographics, numbers, or views.

What explains these divides? While factors like cultural norms, civic education, and the media play important roles, one important explanatory – and certainly aggravating – factor has received little attention: America's winner-take-all electoral system. Electoral systems can influence the type of candidates that run for office, they affect the choices voters make, and they have an important impact on translating electoral support for minorities and other underrepresented groups into legislative power. Yet, the connection of electoral systems with the representation of young people and their participation in politics remains underexplored. Previous research has examined how electoral rules shape the representation and participation

of women and racial minorities. We extend that framework to the age divide, and argue that winner-take-all electoral systems, like the one used in most American elections, make it challenging for young people to get elected, which in turn affects their participation in politics.

In winner-take-all elections, factors like incumbency, name recognition, and fundraising abilities play a larger role in determining a candidate's electability than in proportional systems, largely because parties can only nominate one candidate. With proportional representation, parties can present a diverse list of candidates to appeal to different voter groups, allowing for the inclusion of young candidates without necessarily displacing older ones. Winner-take-all systems also make it difficult for political entrepreneurs to start new parties, especially for geographically dispersed groups. Young voters who do not feel well represented by the current party system are discouraged from starting their own parties and left with bad choices: vote for the party they dislike the least, vote for a third party and waste their vote, or not vote at all and give up electoral influence.

Shifting to a more proportional and permissive electoral system would amplify the voice of young people, improve their representation, and – given the diversity of this age cohort – enhance the inclusion of other minority groups in American politics. Importantly, proportional representation would not just benefit young Americans, but it would strengthen democracy overall by ensuring that everyone's vote counts and not just the vote of swing voters.

The report is organized as follows. It first describes the age representation divide in the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate and comparatively with other OECD countries. The report then turns to the age divide in various forms of participation, such as voting, donating, and political engagement. It then describes the consequences of these divides – what is missing from American politics when older people have disproportionate power and young people have disproportionately less power. Finally, it explains the role that electoral systems play in shaping the incentives of parties and voters to support young candidates and of young people themselves to run for office or participate in politics in other ways.

Key takeaways

✔ Young people are underrepresented in the U.S. Congress.

The U.S. has the widest age representation divide between legislators and the median population than in other OECD countries. The prevalence of older politicians in office is not due to politicians holding on to power for long but reflects an undersupply of young candidates.

✔ Young people participate less than older age groups.

They vote, donate to campaigns, and run for office at lower rates. Young people participate less because they see themselves and their priorities represented less: if you never get put in the game, eventually you stop paying attention to the score. Moreover, young people have fewer resources and higher mobility rates that increase the costs of voting.

✔ Our electoral system is a source of frustration.

The American winner-take-all electoral system forces young voters disaffected with the existing parties to choose candidates they dislike the least or to abstain from voting. It also makes it unfeasible for young people to organize and create new parties to advance their policy interests or for new parties to emerge to appeal to young voters.

✔ In other countries, the age divide is far less drastic.

Countries with more proportional and permissive electoral systems see higher levels of youth representation and participation in politics. Compared to winner-take-all systems, proportional systems provide more opportunities for young people to run for office or to create their own viable parties outside the existing options.

WHO ARE TODAY'S YOUNG PEOPLE?

"Young people" is an admittedly imprecise term. There is no obvious age cutoff between "younger" and "older" voters. In this report, we generally refer to young people as those falling between the ages of 18 to 29 when data was collected and compare them to people in the 30-44, 45-64, and 65 plus age groups. We occasionally also refer to people in younger generations, generally those in Generation Z, born between 1997 and 2012, and in the Millennial Generation, born between 1981 and 1996, as defined by Pew Research.

Representation and Participation Divides

Younger Americans are underrepresented in Congress

The old age of American elected officials is a familiar problem. President Joe Biden was the oldest president in the country's history. Before him, President Donald Trump was the oldest president, and once again became the oldest person to assume the office in January 2025. When he finishes his four-year term, he'll set the record for the oldest American president.

The geriatric crisis is just as bad or worse in Congress. In 2023, the now-late Senator Dianne Feinstein repeatedly made news for being confused about her surroundings and died in office at the age of 90, and the then 82-year old Senator Mitch McConnell froze for 20 seconds in front of TV cameras, apparently also unaware of his surroundings. The attention paid to these kinds of anecdotes about aging leaders is not hype; nearly two-thirds of U.S. Senators are past retirement age.

Age certainly has advantages for elected officials, namely experience and accumulated knowledge. But it also has serious drawbacks beyond higher risk of cognitive decline and health complications. Older politicians often have different policy priorities than younger politicians and different timelines for accomplishing those priorities. And particularly at a time when digital technologies are rapidly disrupting many aspects of life and complex challenges like climate change loom ever larger, the dominance of older politicians prevents tapping the full range of views and talents that are crucial for nimble and adaptive governance.

A healthy system of representative government would balance the harms and benefits of aging leaders and younger voters. At times in American history, this has been the case but it is not anymore. The old age of America's leaders today is historically unique. The median age of the signers of the Declaration of Independence in 1776 was 45 years.[2] In contrast, the median age of the House members that took office in January 2025 was 58 while that of Senators was 65, making it the second oldest group of Senators, surpassed in age only by the Senators of the previous Congress. While these changes surely reflect changes in life expectancy over time, for an institution that is supposed to "think, feel, reason, and act like [the people at large]," Congress remains unrepresentative of the current population age profile.[3] The number of age-eligible younger Americans in Congress is slowly increasing, but young people are still dramatically underrepresented. In 2022, Baby Boomers and the Silent Generation comprised

[2] See "Signers of the Declaration of Independence," National Archives. https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/signers-factsheet.

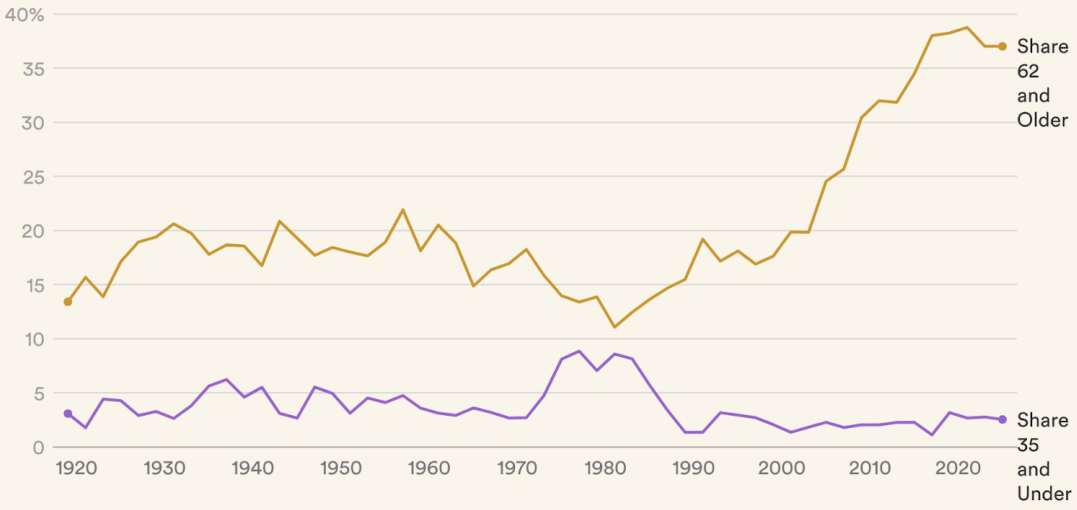
[3] A paraphrase of the quote by John Adams that Congress should be "in miniature, an exact portrait of the people at large. It should think, feel, reason, and act like them."

26% of the population, but held 59% of the seats in the 117th Congress (2021-2023).[4] Millennials, all of whom were legally old enough to serve in the 117th, made up 22% of the population, but only 7% of Congress (Schaeffer 2023).

Since the 1980s, the number of older Americans in Congress has spiked. Figure 1 shows that the share of members of the House of Representatives aged 62 and older – the earliest age at which Americans can start withdrawing certain retirement benefits – has increased since the 1980s, reaching an all time high of almost 40 percent in 2021. Meanwhile, the share of House members 35 years of age and younger has never surpassed 10 percent since the 1920s.

FIGURE 1

Congressional members 62 and older far outnumber those 35 and under.



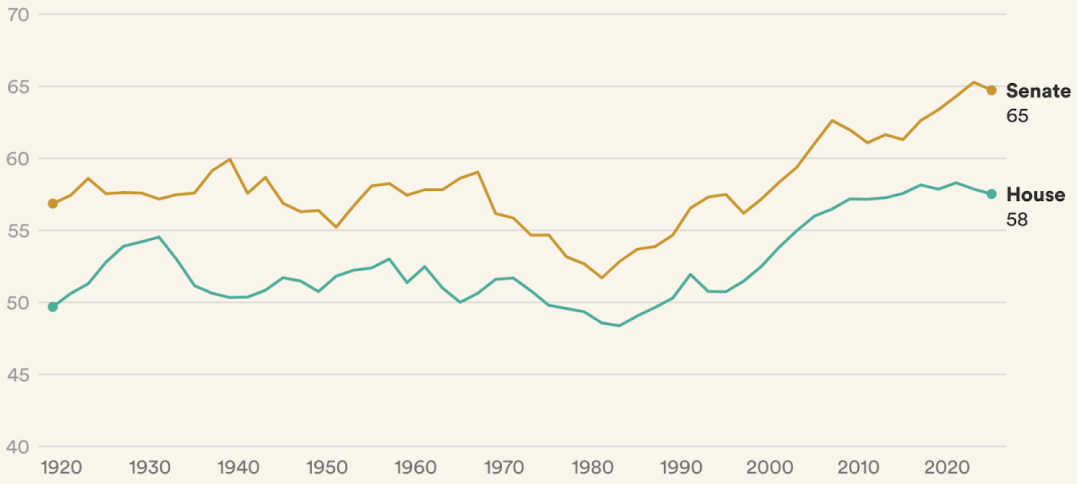
Note: Data from 538 and from author's calculations. Data up to 2023 includes all House members who served in that Congress; 2025 data only considers House members at the start of the 119th Congress.

As seen in Figure 2, the median age of both the Senate and the House of Representatives has increased, reaching its highest levels in the last few electoral cycles. In the Senate, the median age at the start of the 119th Congress (2025-2027) was 65 years and in the House it was 58 years. Both parties have similarly old elected officials in Congress. At the start of the 119th Congress, the median age of House Democrats and Republicans was 58, while in the Senate, it was 66 for Democrats and 64 for Republicans.

[4] "Population distribution in the United States in 2023, by generation," Statista, 2023, https://www.statista.com/statistics/296974/us-population-share-by-generation/

FIGURE 2

Today, the median member of Congress is nearly a decade older than in the 1980s.



The data reflects the median age at the start of each session of Congress.

Source: 538 and Pew Research Center

The high median ages of members of Congress is not explained by the demographics of their constituents. The majority of districts are represented by Congressmembers who are older than the median age of their districts and cannot be explained by a voter preference for older politicians. The U.S. also has the highest share of representatives older than 60 years compared to other OECD countries despite the American population, on average, not being among the oldest of this group (see Figure A2 in the Appendix). This, again, suggests an institutional explanation to the representation age divide.

Finally the issue is not merely due to lengthy terms of incumbency and repeated reelection; rather, both incumbents and newly elected members tend to be older. As we elaborate in the Appendix of the report, the average age of primary election candidates is 51 and 52 years for Democrats and Republicans respectively, which suggests that more than a problem of Congress members clinging to power, there is a problem in the pipeline of people running for office (Stockemer, Thompson, and Sundström 2023).

Younger Americans participate less in politics

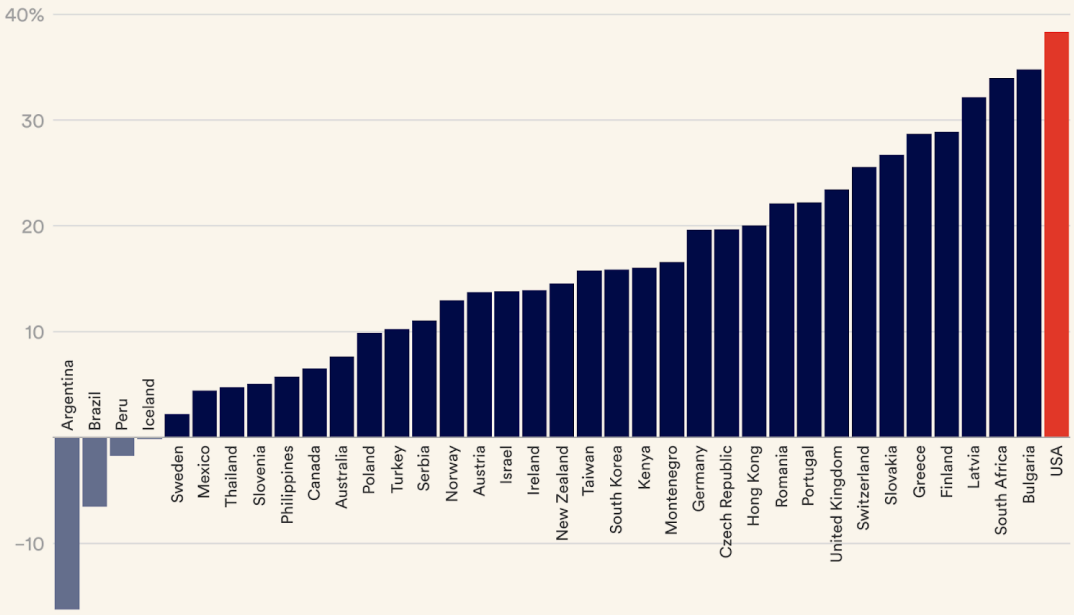
On many indicators of political participation, young people far underperform when compared to their older counterparts. Low levels of political participation – whether it's voting, volunteering, donating, or running for office – have negative ramifications for the representation and interests of young people. It is harder for younger people to be elected and pursue policies aligned with the interests of young people, both because there is a lower supply of young candidates and because young people are not turning out to vote.

Politicians have learned not to count on the youth vote so they focus their appeals on older voters. Public policy, in turn, tends to favor older voters at the expense of young ones (Campbell 2002, 2012; Curry and Haydon 2018; Kiewiet and McCubbins 2014). Increasing youth voter turnout can make politicians more responsive to the needs of young voters. For example, Bertocchi et al. (2020) find that higher youth voter turnout leads to increases in higher education expenditures.

FIGURE 3

The age gap in U.S. voter turnout is the highest among 37 surveyed countries.

Difference in turnout rates by country between voters over 65 and voters 18–29 in the latest lower house election



Source: CSES 4 (2011-2016)

It has long been well documented that young Americans turn out to vote at far lower rates than older people (Holbein and Hillygus 2020; Trachtman, Anzia, and Hill 2023; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). Voter turnout rose in 2020, spurred on by a unique combination of factors including the pandemic, unrest in response to the murder of George Floyd, and a fiercely contested presidential contest. Youth turnout surged, but this was likely an anomaly due to the uniqueness of 2020; youth turnout had a slight drop from 50 percent in 2020 to 47 percent in the 2024 elections, according to estimates by Tuft's Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement. And compared to every older generation, the youngest voters still voted at the lowest rates (Anderson 2022). Data from the University of Florida Election Lab shows that over the past few decades, youth turnout in presidential election years – which see much higher turnout overall – has never even matched older voters' turnout in midterm years,

which see lower turnout. And while this age divide exists in countries around the world, Figure 3 shows that the US has one of the widest age divides in turnout among OECD countries.

As Holbein and Hillygus (2020) argue, low levels of participation are not fully explained by apathy or low levels of interest. Rather, they have more to do with barriers that prevent young voters from following through with their intentions to participate. Policies that make it easier for young people to vote – like same day voter registration, pre-registration, and automatic voter registration – have been shown to increase youth turnout (Bertocchi et al. 2020; Grumbach and Hill 2022; Holbein and Hillygus 2016). Proportional representation, by ensuring that young people have genuine options on the ballot and that parties have incentives to mobilize young voters, could also improve youth turnout.

On other indicators of political participation, young Americans consistently trail behind older ones. Table 1, reproduced from Bonica and Grumbach (2024), reports the average and median ages of people participating in primary elections, donating money to campaigns, and running for office. Young people in the United States are less likely to vote in primary elections and donate to political campaigns (Bonica and Grumbach 2024). Young people also run for office at far lower rates than older people (Bonica and Grumbach 2024; Lawless and Fox 2015; Stockemer, Thompson, and Sundström 2023).

TABLE 1

Average and median ages of political participants

	Average Age	Median Age
General election voters	51	52
Primary election voters	57	59
Donors	57	59
Donors weighed by dollars given	64	66
Congressional candidates	57	58

Source: Adam Bonica and Jacob Grumbach (2024). Old Money: Campaign Finance and Gerontocracy in the United States.

Political consequences of the age divide

Compared to older generations, younger generations in the U.S. are more diverse in terms of race and their sexual orientation, and its members have lower levels of religious affiliation. Different age groups have also gone through different experiences at critical moments of their personal and professional lives – like the 2008 financial crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic – that shape their worldviews and policy preferences.

These differences widen policy differences between younger and older age groups. Our analysis of a nationally representative, multi-year survey from 2019 through 2021 revealed that

there are wide cleavages between young and old people when it comes to key policy areas, including views of taxation and immigration.[5] These differences are naturally reflected in partisanship patterns, with older cohorts tilting slightly towards the Republican party while the youngest cohort widely favors Democrats.[6]

In the 2024 presidential election, this left-right breakdown among young people appeared to shift, at least on the surface. According to survey data from AP VoteCast, President Trump won nearly half of 18-29 year-old voters – a dramatic increase from winning only a third of these voters in 2020.[7] The change was particularly stark among young men, with 6 in 10 white men under 30 and around half of Latino men under 30 voting for Trump.[8]

But under the surface, these changes disguise the still significant partisan and policy divides between young and old Americans. The same survey data show that younger Trump voters consider themselves significantly less conservative than older ones – 55% of Trump voters 18-29 years old said they are "very or somewhat conservative," compared to 67% of Trump voters as a whole and 79% of those over 65 years old. Younger Trump voters are also less motivated by opposition to immigration and have different views about the role and size of government.[9]

Additionally, the 2024 election is not a particularly strong bellwether for determining the views of young Americans. The presidential contest was in many ways colored by voters' concerns with President Biden's age, even after he was off the Democratic ticket. It follows logically that younger voters would oppose the Democratic ticket at uniquely high levels. It is also possible that turnout among young Democratic voters was uniquely low for the same reasons. A few months after the election, survey data from The Economist showed Trump's approval rating among younger voters right back where it was in 2020: underwater by about 20 points.[10]

Still, the most important difference between young and old Americans is not a partisan divide: it is that young Americans are significantly more likely to say that neither party represents them. In the 2019-2021 survey we analyzed, about one fifth of Americans 18-29 identify as Independents – twice the share of 65+ Americans who do. Those who do identify with one of the two major parties are much more likely than their older counterparts to be unenthusiastic about their preferred party, classifying themselves as leaning towards one party or as weak partisans.

The full consequences of these dynamics are yet to be understood. Munger (2022) argues that politics in the coming decades will be defined by generational conflict, with the age divide further intensifying as Baby Boomers amass more wealth and find more time for politics and

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[5] Nationscape Survey: https://www.voterstudygroup.org/nationscape

[6] See https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2024/04/09/age-generational-cohorts-and-party-identification/

[7] Thomson-Deveaux, Amelia. "Trump won more young voters, but many don't agree with him on issues: AP VoteCast," Associated Press, November 15, 2024, https://apnews.com/article/trump-climate-change-immigration-tariffs-young-voters-e4bd29e491d42fd989c32be8eeb2a2cb.

[8] Brown, Matt. "Young men swung to the right for Trump after a campaign dominated by masculine appeals," Associated Press, November 30, 2025, https://apnews.com/article/trump-young-men-voters-election-latinos-democrats-ff30e38698a41132cf90345fffabe579.

[9] Associated Press, November 15, 2024.

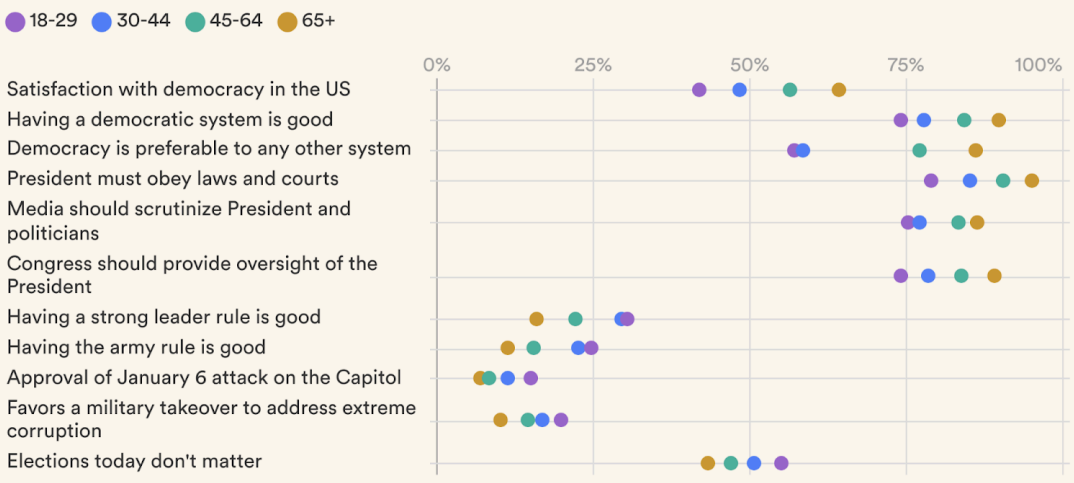
[10] "How popular is Donald Trump?" The Economist, May 27, 2025. https://www.economist.com/interactive/trump-approval-tracker.

news consumption thanks to retirement. If Boomers cement their influence on politics, it will come at the expense of younger generations. Politics will revolve over issues prioritized by older people, like protecting pensions and social security instead of investing in climate change, higher education, and increasing the housing supply. And because of the two-party system, there would be limited opportunities for young people to create their own parties to advance the issues they care about. For Munger (2022), this creates a risk for instability as the excessive focus on issues prioritized by older generations prevents gradual policy changes, holding society back and preventing policymakers from addressing new and emerging issues.

A large group of young, loosely affiliated and alienated voters could also pose a threat to democratic stability if they become disillusioned with democracy and more open to alternative political systems. But young people also hold strong values of tolerance and inclusion that are incompatible with non-democratic systems and they may be more willing to support reforms that make American politics more responsive and representative and to demand new ways of organizing the political and electoral world. Young people today see politics as corrupt and inefficient and they do not aspire to run for office like young people of previous generations, but they are still interested in participating and contributing meaningfully to society through other means (Lawless and Fox 2015).

FIGURE 4

Views of democracy in the U.S. by age groups



Data from the November 2022 Wave of the Voter Study Group survey (N=6000).

Recent survey evidence indicates that young people are frustrated with the current political system and that their commitment to democratic norms is slipping. Relative to older people, young people are less willing to vote against politicians who violate democratic norms (Frederiksen 2024) and almost half of young voters polled in April of 2024 believed that elections in the U.S. do not represent them (49%) and that the American political system does not work for them (51%) (Talcott 2024). Cross-country survey evidence also shows that age gaps themselves may contribute to a generalized dissatisfaction with democracy across all age

groups, suggesting that the exclusion of young voices hurts the functioning of democracy for everyone (Roman, Bellodi, and Williamson 2025). A recent Protect Democracy report on Gen Z's perceptions of democracy found that while Gen Z is generally supportive of democratic principles like free speech, an important segment of the generation is frustrated with democracy's ability to help them meet their goals and needs, pushing many to detachment from politics and, in extreme cases, to tolerance of political violence.

Satisfaction with democracy has been declining the most among younger generations in the U.S. (Foa 2020) and confidence that democracy can deliver results is low among the Gen Z generation (Apau and Suzuki 2025). Low levels of satisfaction with democracy do not necessarily entail a wholesale rejection of the system and could instead signal greater appetite for reforms that could improve democracy.

Indeed, young voters are more supportive of electoral reforms like ranked-choice voting compared to older ones (Anthony et al. 2023; McCarthy and Santucci 2021) and, unlike older voters, they are more likely to vote in elections held with ranked-choice voting than in those without (Juelich and Coll 2021). Young voters also report wanting more political parties (McCarthy and Santucci 2021) and a survey from New Jersey found that young voters there find a moderate party that would nominate candidates through fusion voting more appealing than older voters (Drutman 2022).

“ Young voters report wanting **more political parties** and a survey from New Jersey found that young voters there find a moderate party that would nominate candidates through **fusion voting** more appealing than older voters.

The Impact of Electoral Systems

Why are age divides in political representation and participation so wide in the US, and especially so compared to other industrialized countries? Many factors contribute to these age divides – societal biases, the accumulation of financial resources and political capital over time, incumbency effects, formal age minimums for holding office, the lack of institutional support from political parties. But one of the most important factors is less obvious, lying beneath the surface of our democratic process: the winner-take-all electoral system that America uses to elect its representatives.

Extensive research in political science has documented how electoral rules affect the political representation and participation of ethnic minorities and women. Studies generally show that winner-take-all systems, like the one used in most American elections, impose greater barriers for minorities and women than proportional electoral systems (Golder et al. 2017; Kittilson and Schwindt-Bayer 2010, 2012; Lublin 2014; Lublin and Bowler 2018). A small but growing literature similarly looks at how electoral systems affect youth representation, and finds that young adults tend to be better represented in legislatures that are elected through proportional rules compared to those elected with winner-take-all ones (Joshi 2013; Stockemer and Sundström 2018; Sundström and Stockemer 2021).

> “ Young adults tend to be better represented in legislatures that are elected through proportional rules compared to those elected with winner-take-all ones.

Based on this research, we argue that a proportional electoral system could improve youth representation and participation through three main mechanisms: encouraging parties to put forward a diverse set of candidates, including younger ones; lowering barriers to access for younger candidates; and facilitating party formation that helps enhance electoral competition. Before diving into the details of these mechanisms, we provide a brief explanation of proportional and winner-take-all systems.

Winner-take-all refers to systems where only the candidate that obtains more votes than the next closest competitor wins the seat in each district. Often, the result is a party winning seats

out of proportion to their share of the vote. By contrast, proportional representation refers to a family of electoral systems in which parties win legislative seats in rough proportion to their vote shares, thanks to a combination of multi-member districts and formulas that proportionally translate votes to seats. In systems with proportional rules, more parties are typically able to meaningfully compete in elections and voters are more likely to vote sincerely (Cox 1997; Hix, Hortala-Vallve, and Riambau-Armet 2017; Lovett 2025).

While the specific design of proportional systems varies from country to country, they generally fit into two broad categories: open list proportional representation or closed list proportional representation (for more, see Carey and Pocasangre 2024). In open list, voters are free to vote for an individual candidate within a party list. Parties win seats in proportion to the votes the party receives; those seats are then assigned to their candidates based on the votes they received individually. In closed list, parties present a list of candidates and voters select a party list, with seats won by the party filled in the order in which they appear on the list.

Candidate Inclusion and Diversification

The features of proportional representation may make it easier for young adults to gain access to office and improve youth representation (Stockemer and Sundström 2022). Parties in these systems have incentives to present a diversified list of candidates that appeals to a wider range of voters. That allows parties to directly compete for the votes of different voting groups, such as by including young candidates that can bring in the youth vote. Research on descriptive representation generally finds that voters tend to have an affinity for candidates that are similar to them and voters also seem to have an affinity for candidates who are closer in age to them (Bonica and Grumbach 2024; Castanho Silva 2025; Sevi 2021). Including young candidates in a party list can help bring in young voters into the electorate. Moreover, because parties can present multiple candidates and win multiple seats, the inclusion of younger candidates does not necessarily displace older candidates, and importantly, it does not displace older incumbent candidates.

The inclusion of younger candidates – who generally do not have as extensive networks, experience, or financial and political capital as older politicians – also does not carry as much risk for parties as it does in winner-take-all systems since parties can still win seats even if the younger candidate does not perform as well as others. This gives parties in proportional systems a greater ability to invest in younger candidates. In contrast, in the American system in which only one candidate can win and a party would be shut out of a district if it does not win the race, parties have incentives to play it safe and put forward the most electable candidate—usually the ones with the greatest resources, experience, or broad appeal. More often than not, this results in generic candidates that can garner the most votes. As Stockemer and Sundström write, “in most districts, middle-aged to senior men of the dominant ethnicity with high education fulfill this profile best” (Stockemer and Sundström 2018).

Lowering Barriers of Incumbency, Fundraising, and Name-Recognition

These dynamics also lessen the incumbency advantage in proportional systems. Incumbents in these systems still enjoy certain advantages like being placed higher up on the party list or receiving more resources from the party for campaigning. But non-incumbents are not entirely shut out from running for office. In closed list systems, young candidates may have a harder time getting elected if they are placed low in a party list, but they still have a chance of winning the more seats the party wins. In open list systems, even if placed low in the list, young candidates can win seats if they garner enough support by building a personal brand or tapping a segment of the electorate that wants younger representatives in office. While campaigning and developing name recognition requires more resources, it is in the interest of the party to help out these candidates since the more votes they can garner, particularly from untapped groups, the more seats the party gets overall.

In winner-take-all systems where parties can only nominate one person, parties have greater incentives to exploit the benefits of incumbency, like name recognition and visibility, to minimize the risks of losing a district. In electoral systems where candidates are selected through primary elections, like in the US, incumbency carries even greater weight. In these systems, candidates have to fundraise and campaign by themselves in order to win the nomination of the party, which is easier when the candidates have greater financial and political capital, which tend to accumulate with age. The advantages that fundraising confers in the United States help explain why one of the main avenues to elected office in the United States is to be a lawyer who can fundraise early in their professional network, something young people would have a hard time doing by themselves (Bonica 2020).

Younger adults may be discouraged from even running for office given the high barriers to access a party nomination, which creates a problem of low supply of young candidates, even early in the pipeline. Stockemer, Thompson, and Sundström find that in the 2020 election cycle for the U.S. House, the average age of all candidates for primary elections was 51.47 years and the average age of primary election winners was even higher at 54 years (Stockemer, Thompson, and Sundström 2023).

More and Healthier Political Parties

One final explanation for why proportional electoral systems may be more amenable to the representation of young adults is that these systems are generally more permissive to new and smaller parties, particularly when there are many underlying cleavages in society, whereas winner-take-all systems tend to be hostile to new parties (Neto and Cox 1997; Taagepera 1999).

In winner-take-all systems, new parties can emerge if they have a geographically clustered base of support, which is easier for minorities that are regionally concentrated but harder for age-based groups that are geographically dispersed. In the US context, the winner-take-all system, along with other factors like ballot access laws, strongly discourages the creation of

new parties, effectively shutting down party organizing opportunities for young voters who are not aligned with either the Democratic or Republican party.

In contrast, proportional systems translate votes to seats proportionally so new parties tend to have an easier time emerging and remaining viable, giving young adults the opportunity to create new parties if they feel they are not being well represented by the existing parties. Political entrepreneurs can also engage young voters back into politics by creating new parties centered on particular issues of concern to young adults, as has been the case with Green parties in Germany and in Nordic countries (Stockemer and Sundström 2022).

There are lots of explanations given for young people's low participation rates in the United States, including psychological effects, structural effects, or effects due to higher mobility among younger voters.[11] However, when compared with countries with proportional systems, there is reason to think that the effects of winner-take-all play a role, and that younger voters would turn out at higher rates in more dynamic systems that feature a more diverse set of parties.

In Germany's 2021 elections, for example, more than three quarters of young voters aged 21 to 29 turned out to vote and were more likely to vote for less traditional parties, the Greens and the Free Democrats.[12] The creation of new parties by and for younger adults can in turn trigger a virtuous cycle for youth representation. As more young adults are brought into the political fold by these new parties, established parties will want to compete for these newly available votes and appeal to young voters by modifying their policies or running more young candidates on their lists. Moreover, more parties give young voters more meaningful options, allowing them to vote for the party they genuinely like instead of strategically voting for the party they dislike the least or not voting at all.

Countries with proportional representation tend to have more competitive elections, which is associated with healthier and stronger political parties that can better engage with young voters. In the current American system, competitive elections for legislative seats has become the exception and not the norm. In the 2024 electoral cycle, only "8 percent of congressional races (36 of 435) and 7 percent of state legislative races (400 of 5,465) were decided by fewer than five percentage points" according to an analysis by the New York Times.[13] The dearth of competition is the product of various factors – including gerrymandering, partisan sorting, polarization, only two political parties – all of which are made worse by the winner-take-all electoral system. Without serious competition for most districts, parties become complacent at

[11] Psychological and identity factors emphasize that young voters have not yet developed the habit of voting (Coppock and Green 2016), do not yet identify as strongly with their age cohort as older voters do (Trachtman, Anzia, and Hill 2023), or face higher cognitive costs in obtaining information about where and how to vote (Miller, Reynolds, and Singer 2017). Then there are structural factors: young people donate less to political campaigns because they generally have lower incomes than older people but also because people tend to donate to candidates closer to their age and there are fewer young candidates running for office (Bonica and Grumbach 2024). This in turn makes it more difficult for young candidates to run for office and reduces the number of young candidates. Finally, young people are far more mobile than older people, and American voting rules require that people register in their new address; people have to update their voting registration whenever they move. Higher mobility creates a correlation between age and participation that accounts for why younger voters are less likely to be registered and thus less likely to vote (Ansolabehere, Hersh, and Shepsle 2012).

[12] Erin Delmore, "Older Voters Dominate German Politics, but Now the Young Are Fighting Back." Wall Street Journal, September 12, 2021

[13] See Nick Corasiniti and Michael Wines for the New York Times https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/26/us/politics/2024-elections-congress-state-redistricting.html

the local level: they can win without having to persuade or mobilize voters and without recruiting good candidates. For younger and older voters alike, this means that unless they live in a swing district, their vote largely does not count.

The result is weak parties that are little more than party labels. Weak parties represent a barrier for young people wanting to engage in politics, whether by voting or as candidates. Weak parties means there is no organization reaching out to new voters, which would help young people participate more actively in politics, and no organization identifying new leaders in a community and cultivating their talents to run for office. Weak parties also lack the resources to support candidates and shape their candidate pool, making electoral success heavily dependent on an individual's fundraising ability, which puts young people who want to run for office at a disadvantage. As a result, politics becomes less accessible to new voices, reinforcing the dominance of older, well-funded, and well-connected candidates. Proportional representation can introduce more electoral competition by allowing for more parties to survive and compete, which would strengthen political parties and help them develop the organizational capacity to recruit, develop, and support new talent in their candidate pool and to maintain stronger connections with different voting groups, including young voters.

Weak parties also **lack the resources** to support candidates and shape their candidate pool, making electoral success heavily dependent on an individual's fundraising ability, which puts young people who want to run for office at a disadvantage.

The Evidence

Existing research broadly supports the theoretical predictions that proportional representation systems tend to be better for youth representation in politics. The research has mostly focused on showing different patterns of representation between winner-take-all and proportional electoral rules, but has yet to fully parse out which of the mechanisms of proportional rules leads to greater youth representation.

Stockemer and Sundström (2022) find that countries with proportional representation have a higher share of young representatives than countries with winner-take-all rules, with proportional systems having about five percentage points more representatives aged 35 and

under than winner-take-all systems. They contextualize this difference by noting that “given an average of ten percent of young deputies aged 35 years and below in [the] global sample of legislatures…these differences are rather large” (Stockemer and Sundström 2018). Adjusting the share of young representatives in legislatures by the share of young people in the population to account for differences in the age composition of countries that might explain different levels of youth representation, Stockemer and Sundström still find that countries with proportional systems have more young people in their legislatures (Sundström and Stockemer 2021). Focusing on Asian legislatures, Joshi (2013) also finds that countries with proportional rules tend to have younger representatives.

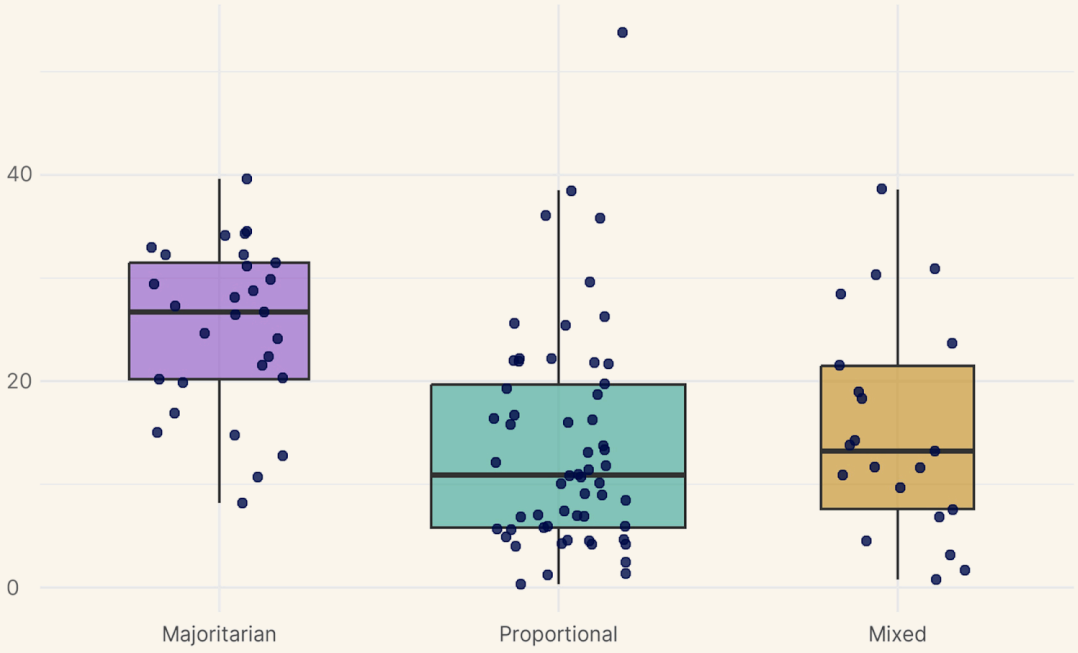
Our own analysis of the age divide between legislatures and the populations they represent illustrates the differences in youth representation across electoral systems. On average, proportional and mixed systems have a significantly smaller divide between the median age of legislators and the median age of the electorate, as shown in Figure 5. The age divide in winner-take-all systems is about 27 years, on average, while in proportional and mixed systems, the age divide is an average of 16 and 17 years, respectively. The differences in the age divide relative to winner-take-all systems are statistically significant.

One of the reasons why young adults may have an easier time gaining access to office is because parties can nominate various candidates on their lists as opposed to only one candidate as in winner-take-all systems. Our analysis provides some evidence for this explanation and a reminder that electoral systems have “sweet-spots” between districts that are too small or too large in magnitude, that is, the number of seats from each district (Carey and Hix 2011; Carey and Pocasangre 2024). In turn, a higher district magnitude also reduces the threshold for new parties to emerge and remain viable, which could also contribute to greater youth participation.

FIGURE 5

Proportional systems have lower age gaps.

Difference between the median age of the legislature and the country's mean age



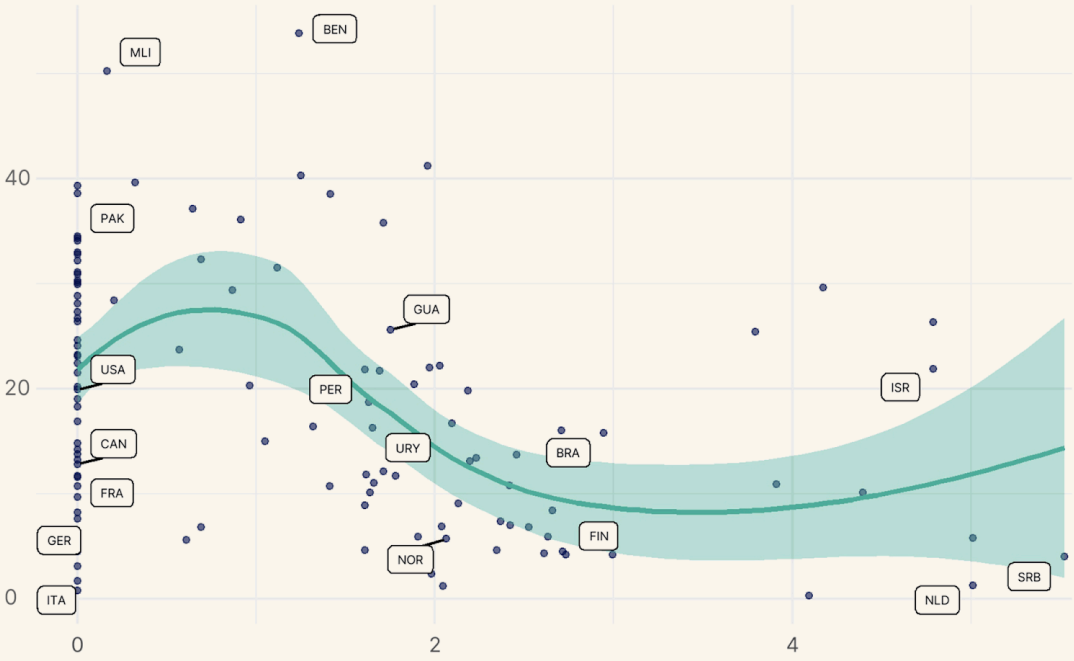
Source: Worldwide Age Representation in Parliaments Dataset; Our World in Data; Democratic Electoral Systems Dataset.

Simply comparing the age divide between countries with an average district magnitude of one and countries with an average district magnitude greater than one, we find that the first group of countries has an average age gap between representatives and constituents of about 22 years whereas the latter group of countries has an average gap of about 18 years, a statistically significant difference.

Looking at the relationship between the average district magnitude and the age gap provides a more nuanced picture, as seen in Figure 6. Higher district magnitudes are associated with lower age gaps between legislators and constituents – up to a point. As district magnitude continues to increase, its association with the age gap becomes more tenuous, largely a reflection of the fewer cases of countries with very large district magnitudes. Of course, there are a number of factors other than district magnitude that influence age divides across countries. For instance, as Figure 6 shows, Germany has a low age gap and an average district magnitude of one, but it also has a mixed electoral system that ensures greater proportionality between party vote shares and the seats they win and that allows parties to run different types of candidates in a district from those they run on a party list. Italy also has a mixed system, with a share of legislators elected in winner-take-all districts and the rest through party lists.

FIGURE 6

Age gap and average district magnitude



Note: Average district magnitude has been logged. Data from IPU and the Democratic Electoral Systems Database.

We see a similar, if starker, pattern when plotting the relationship between the effective number of electoral parties and the age gap between legislators and constituents.[14] As the effective number of parties increases – whether because of a more permissive electoral system with a greater number of representatives per district, the nature of social cleavages, or both – the age gap decreases, but up to a point. The age gap then starts to increase as the number of parties increase, a relationship best characterized as u-shaped and that once again reminds us of the electoral "sweet spot" between systems that are too restrictive like winner-take-all ones and systems that are too permissive.

These are all suggestive relationships and we do not make causal claims about them. However, the non-linear relationships between age gaps and district magnitudes and the number of parties are important to keep in mind when developing theories of age representation and participation across electoral systems. For instance, a large district magnitude can make it harder for candidates to stand out and for voters to keep track of candidates as parties put forward longer lists with more candidates.

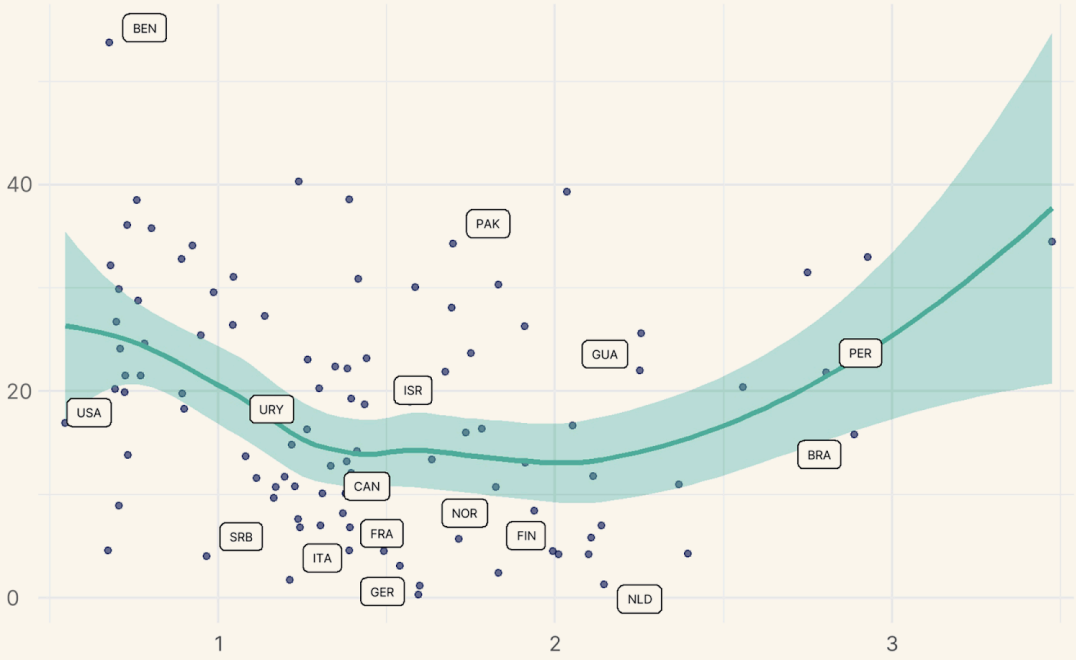
In open list systems, this means that candidates have to invest more resources to stand out from candidates from their own party and from other parties in order to win a seat. In these cases, name recognition, financial and political capital, and experience – all factors that accumulate

[14] The effective number of electoral parties is a commonly used measure in political science to compare the number of parties across countries by adjusting the count of parties vying for office by the vote shares they actually obtain.

with age – become more important for candidates to win office, making it so that young candidates without these resources can be lost among all the other candidates. In closed lists, these same factors may keep young candidates from being ranked higher on the party lists, making it harder for them to win a seat.

FIGURE 7

Age gap and effective number of electoral parties



Data from IPU and the Democratic Electoral Systems Database.

A highly fragmented party system also increases electoral uncertainty as new parties can emerge in one cycle and disappear in the next one. Parties, then, have incentives to focus on particular districts or candidates to ensure their survival, which can come at the expense of youth candidates who do not have the political capital to win. For their part, voters may have a harder time identifying and voting for young candidates, especially if these candidates have fewer resources to campaign. They may also not be willing to vote for new, smaller parties if they are not sure the parties will win enough representation to survive electorally and to have influence over policy.

Conclusion

The dominance of older politicians in American politics poses a challenge for democratic governance – not because older leaders lack capability, as their experience and perspectives are invaluable, but because a representative system should reflect the full diversity of its population, rather than disproportionately favoring one age group. Without young people in elected office, the country is losing out on the talent, experience with new technologies and new types of jobs, and perspectives of a large segment of the population. When young people are disengaged, the political system loses its ability to channel their concerns—leading to distorted priorities and deepening disillusionment. And with a political system that is not representative or responsive to all age groups, and particularly the young, democratic politics start losing their appeal.

Various reforms have been proposed to address the age divide that we have documented in this report. Popular proposals include term limits for legislators and age limits for elected officials. In 2024, for instance, voters in North Dakota approved a ballot measure that imposes age limits on candidates from the state for the US Congress.[15] These reforms, however, do little to address the supply problem of too few young candidates and the many barriers that young people face to become candidates and get elected to office. Moreover, term limits can create unintended consequences – like eroding the capacity of elected legislators and the value of holding office, both of which are already in decline – and age limits ignore the different ways that people age as well as advances in science and medicine that have improved longevity.

Campaign finance reform may help younger candidates run for office and interventions like same-day voter registration can improve youth turnout. But getting at the root of the issue will require greater electoral competition and giving voters more choices on the ballot.

This is where electoral system reform comes in. More permissive electoral systems, like proportional representation, provide more avenues to elected office for younger candidates, whether it is through inclusion in party lists to appeal to a wider voter base, through the greater ease to form new parties, or through higher turnout levels. By expanding opportunities for younger candidates and by making voting more meaningful through more choices, proportional representation can help increase youth representation in politics in addition to attenuating the influence of barriers to elected office, like incumbency.

The problem with electoral reforms is that those in power do not want to change the way they were elected and are less willing to shake things up. So while a more permissive and proportional electoral system may bring about better youth representation – and a healthier democracy as a result – there is a lot of resistance to such changes by current elected officials. It will be incumbent on young people to demand electoral reform.

[15] See “North Dakota sets age limit for Congress candidates” https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c844xvn1r42o

Younger voters are especially eager for more political choices, so they may be the ones to lead efforts for a better and more representative electoral system. A 2022 Pew survey found that "[y]ounger adults are more likely than older adults to say they wish there were more political parties to choose from in this country."[16] Young people's support for multi-party politics and their demands for different party options can be channelled into creating a key and durable constituency for electoral reform.

> By expanding opportunities for younger candidates and by making voting more meaningful through more choices, proportional representation can help increase youth representation in politics in addition to attenuating the influence of barriers to elected office, like incumbency.

Electoral reform is difficult, but not impossible. It will require sustained investment in public education that explains what the reform options are and that generates excitement by showing that reform can happen and is already happening. Recent success stories at the city and state level help make the case that reform is possible: Portland switched to proportional ranked choice voting to elect its city council; New York City started using ranked choice voting for primary elections in 2021; Alaska has been experimenting with ranked choice voting and top-four primaries; and even Congress members are starting to show interest in reform options for the House of Representatives.

Reform will also require creating coalitions with other aligned groups, like those seeking better climate policies that ensure a liveable future for generations to come, those advocating for fairness in the many domains of policymaking, and those fighting for democracy and the rule of law. And yes, it will require young people organizing, finding uncontested or tight primaries, and challenging incumbents in order to have elected officials who can be champions of electoral reform.

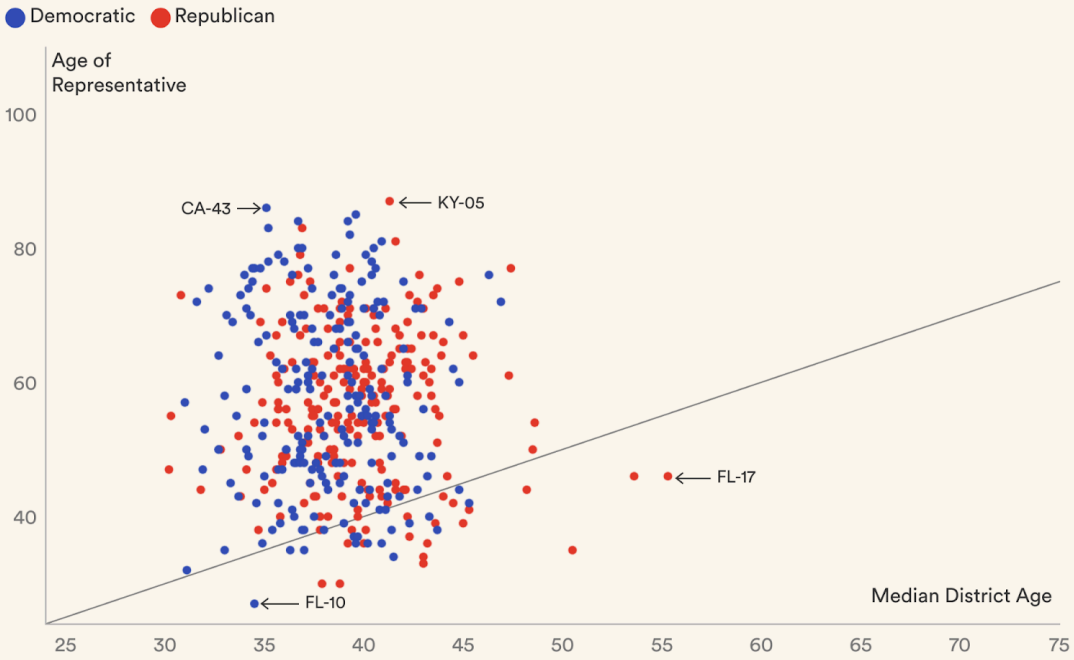
[16] Pew Research Center (2022). "As Partisan Hostility Grows, Signs of Frustration With the Two-Party System."

Appendix

There is a wide divide between the age of representatives and the median age of the districts they represent. Figure A1 shows the age divide between representatives and their constituents for the 119th Congress (2025-2027). The majority of districts are represented by Congress members who are older than the district median and that age divide is largely bipartisan. Moreover, public opinion research has shown that while voters generally prefer candidates with greater experience, which favors older candidates, voters tend to prefer candidates in their 40s and 50s and usually penalize candidates in their 70s (Bansak et al. 2021; Kirkland and Coppock 2018; Ono and Burden 2019; Roberts and Wolak 2023). That we see so many older politicians in office despite these voter preferences hints at the influence of institutional factors and differences in electoral participation across age groups (Roberts and Wolak 2023).

FIGURE A1

In the overwhelming majority of Congressional districts, the representative is older than the median age of constituents.



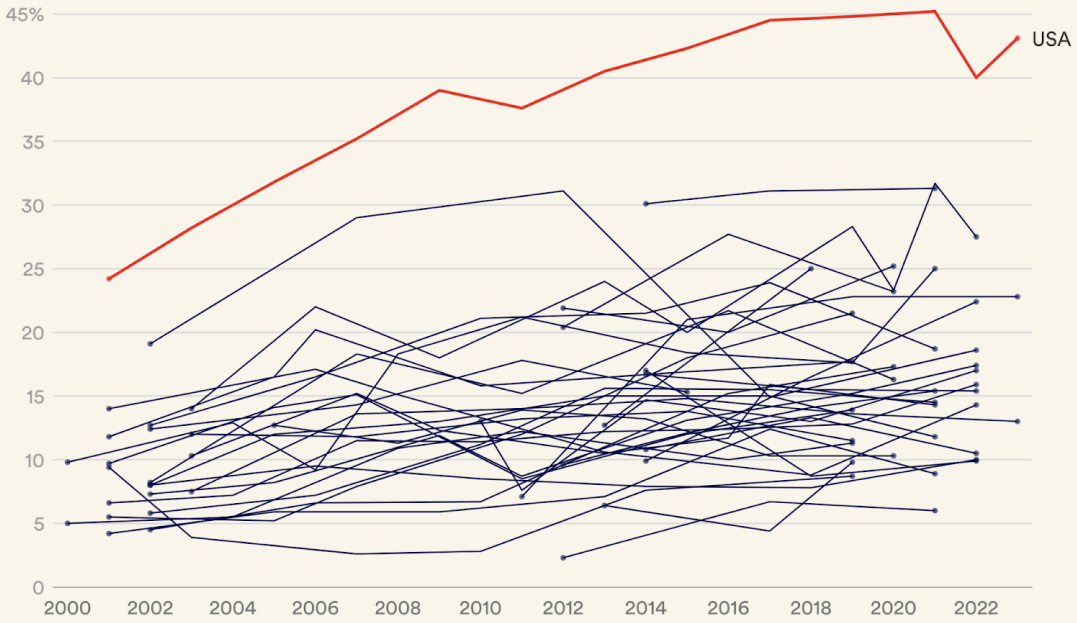
Source: Biographical Directory of the US Congress and American Community Survey 5 Year Estimates (2023)

An aging legislature and a wide age divide between Congress members and their constituents are also unique to the United States. The US has the highest share of representatives older than

60 years of age among OECD countries. As seen in Figure A2, no other OECD country comes close to the US in terms of legislators over 60.

FIGURE A2

The U.S. has the highest share of representatives over 60 among OECD countries.



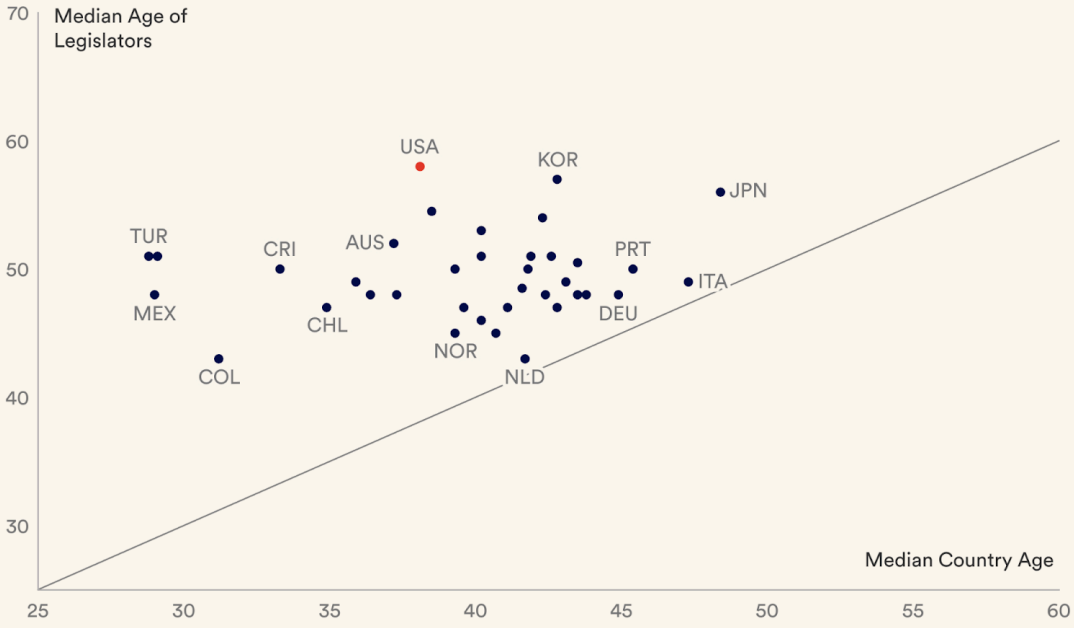
Source: Worldwide Age Representation in Parliaments (Stockemeyer & Sundstrom)

This is not because the US is an old country and so its representatives tend to be older. In fact, Figure A3 illustrates that the age divide between the representatives and their constituents in the US is one of the highest among OECD countries. Only Turkey and Israel, which are both very young countries (median ages of 29 years in both countries), have a wider age divide between legislators and their constituents. In both countries, the median age of legislators is about 22 years greater than the median age of the countries they represent.

Today's Congress is not uniquely old because incumbents are sticking around longer; it's uniquely old because both incumbents and newly elected members tend to be older. Figure A4 shows that in the House, the average number of terms served by House members has decreased since 2010, suggesting that there has been greater turnover, and yet the median age of the House has increased. In both the House and Senate, the average number of terms served has been historically variable and yet the age of both chambers has mostly increased. Moreover, as Figure A5 illustrates, the median age of new members of Congress has experienced an upward trend.

FIGURE A3

The U.S. has one of the largest gaps between the age of its legislators and the age of its constituents.



The graph plots the latest available data for each country and only includes data for legislators from lower or unicameral legislative bodies.

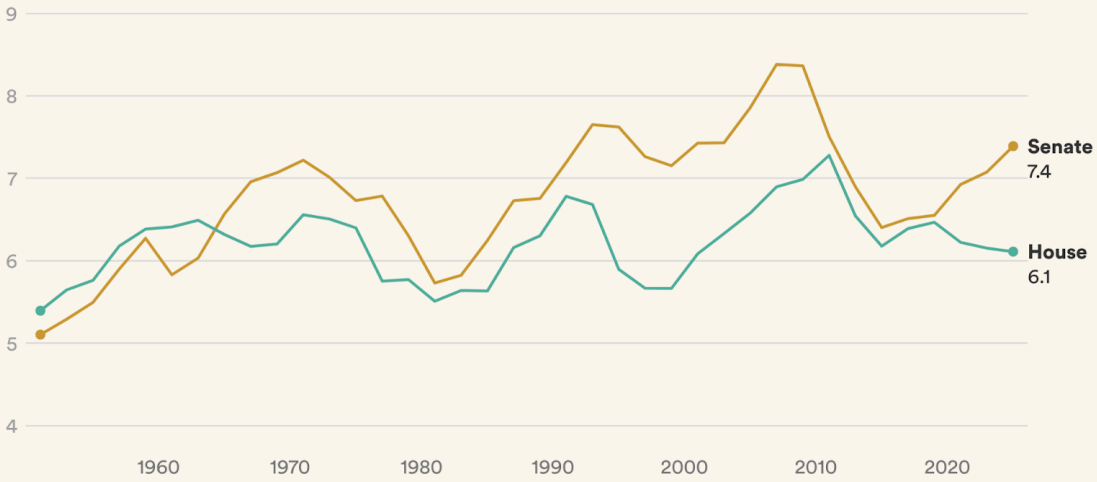
Source: Daniel Stockemer and Aksel Sundström: Worldwide Age Representation in Parliaments

In the most recent Congress starting in 2025, the median age of new House members was 50 years. The median age of new members was at its lowest in 1979 when new members had a median age of 39. In the Senate, the median age of new Senators dropped from a high of 60 years in 2021 to 55 in 2023 but that is still higher than the median age of 39 years in 1963. Higher levels of turnover and older incoming cohorts suggests that Congress members are retiring more often but they are not being replaced by young members. Further, the average age of primary election candidates is 51 years among Democrats and 52 among Republicans while the average age of primary election winners is 54 in both parties (Stockemer, Thompson, and Sundström 2023).

These patterns suggest that while members of Congress are getting older, they are not necessarily getting more years of experience in their jobs. Indeed, today the United States has the harms of an aging Congress without the benefit of more experienced representatives (Porter and Treul 2024). Imposing limits on how many terms members can serve – a popular proposal among voters – would do little to address the problem of an aging Congress if new members are older than the general population (Pew Research Center 2023).

FIGURE A4

Average number of terms served by Congress members, 1950–2025

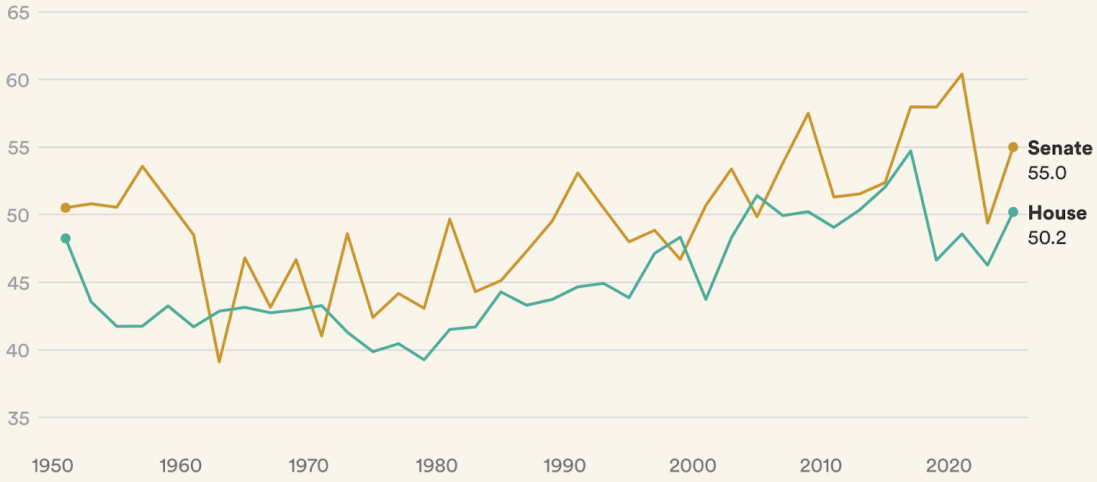


Excludes new members of Congress. Senate terms refer to the number of Congresses a Senator has participated in.

Source: 538 and Biographical Directory of the US Congress

FIGURE A5

Median age of new members of Congress, 1951–2025



Source: 538 and Biographical Directory of the US Congress

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